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Rosicrucian Doctrine in Alexander Pope's "THE RAPE OF THE LOCK"

Abstract: *"The Rape of The Lock"* is the most exquisite specimen of filigree work ever invented. The Supernatural Machinery in this poem is based on Rosicrucian doctrine. According to this doctrine the four elements are inhabited by Sylphs, Nymphs, Gnomes and Salamanders. Alexander Pope in his dedicatory Epistle to Miss Arabella Fermor informs that the four Supernatural beings i.e. the Sylphs, Nymphs, Gnomes and salamanders correspond to the four elements viz. Air, Earth, Water and Fire.

Alexander Pope belongs to the eighteenth century which is popularly known as the Neo-classical or Augustan age. His work *The Rape of The Lock* is the most exquisite specimen of filigree work ever invented. The supernatural machinery in this poem is based on Rosicrucian doctrine. According to this doctrine, the four elements are inhabited by Sylphs, nymphs, gnomes and salamanders. In a heroic poem, the supernatural elements are the powerful Gods who help their protégés and take revenge on those who have insulted them. The immediate source of Pope's supernatural machinery, however, was *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670) by de Villars. Pope in his dedicatory Epistle to Miss Arabella Fermor informs that the four supernatural beings, i.e. the sylphs, gnomes, nymphs and salamanders correspond to the

four elements, viz. air, earth, water and fire. About the nature of gnomes, the following extract will give a sample of what de Villars intended them to be:

*The Earth is filled almost to the center with Gnomes or Pharyes; a people of small stature: the guardian's treasures, of Mines, and of precious stones. They are Igenious, friends of men, and easie to commanded*¹

Since *The Rape of The Lock* is a mock heroic poem and Pope's aim is to evoke laughter and correct the unnaturalness of the young people by means of humour, the supernatural elements are the sylphs. He explains the characteristics of Sylphs whom he calls the machinery:

*The machinery, Madam is a term invented by the critics to signify that part which the Deities, Angels, or Daemons are made to act in poems for the ancient poets are in one respect like many modern ladies: let an action be never so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of the utmost importance. These machines I determined to raise on a very new and odd foundation, the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits.*²

In most of the famous epics *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aenied* and *Paradise Lost*, Machinery consists of supernatural beings like Gods and angels who play a vital in the action of the poems thus showing that human world is not independent or even adequate and those supernatural powers have an important bearing on this world. The machinery in *The Rape of The Lock* comprises of the Sylphs led by Ariel.

Pope tells in the poem that beautiful women return after their death to the elements from which they were derived. Termagants or violent women become Salamanders or spirits of the fire. Women of Gentle and pleasing deposition pass into nymphs or water spirits.

Prudish women become gnomes or earth spirits. Light hearted coquettes are changes into sylphs or spirits of the air.

To their first elements their souls retire:

The sprights of fiery Termagants in flame

Mount up, and take a Salamander's Name.

Soft yielding Minds to water glide away,

And sip with Nymphs, their Elemental Tea.

The graner prude sinks downward to a Gnome,

In search of mischief still on earth to roam

The light coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,³

The first and foremost occupation of the sylphs in the protection of fair and chaste ladies who reject the male sex. It is they who guard and save the chastity of maidens from falling victims to the allurements of treacherous friends and dashing young men whose music softens their minds and dancing inflames their chastity. Ariel says:

What guards the purity of melting Maids,

In courtly Balls and Midnight Masquerades,

Safe from the treacherous friend, the daring spark,⁴

Ariel says they are the "light militia"⁵ of the lower sky. They hang over the perfume boxes, hang by the golden rings worn by ladies and fly over beautiful ladies. The gnomes or earth spirits fill the minds of proud maidens with foolish ideas which make them indulge in vain dreams of being married to lords and peers:

When offers are disdain'd, and Love deny'd.

Then gay ideas crowd the vacant brain;

While Peers and Dukes, and all their sweeping Train,

And Garters, Stars, and Coronets appear,

And in soft sounds, your Grace salutes their Ear.⁶

These gnomes teach young Coquettes to ogle and pretend blushing at the sight of the fashionable young men who cause their hearts to flutter. The sylphs show a delightful downscaling of the epic machines. The sylphs in this poem are both a mirror and mock apotheosis of customs and conventions of the society of the times.

Pope's technique of employing supernatural machinery allows him to critique the situation, it also helps to keep the satire light and to exonerate individual women from too severe a judgement. Machinery serves various purposes in the poem. It imparts splendour and wonder to the actors and the actions in the story. The sylphs are added to the poem not simply as shining trinkets but to develop and flavour the whole. The machinery of sylphs in this poem is vastly superior. It allows Pope to show his awareness of the absurdities which nevertheless is charming, delightful and filled with a real poetry.

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